

INTRODUCTION

(Isaiah 5,1-7; Matthew 21,33-43) Those of us who have ever had a garden know how much work it is. We can only imagine how much work is involved with setting up an entire vineyard. Isaiah describes some of what was involved in today's first reading. If we wonder why there was a watchtower in the vineyard, it was necessary to watch over the grapes at harvest time both night and day to protect the grapes from thieves and predators. Isaiah apparently was not only a talented poet, but it seems he could also sing. We can see his audience coming to the conclusion that Isaiah's friend wasted his time trying to produce a good crop and suddenly they all discovered they were the vineyard he was singing about. From a historical perspective, the prophecy of Isaiah literally came to be true when the Assyrian invasion came and much of the land was laid waste.

HOMILY

The vineyard of the Lord is the house of Israel we sing in the psalm refrain. Truly in the religious history of the world, Israel was God's special people. But all that changed with Christ. We are God's special people today. So the two stories about God's vineyard, which applied to God's people 2000 years ago, now speak to us.

So what is he telling us? He's telling us to look at the practical, down to earth things we do every day. For example, we like things to work for us. We buy a TV, we expect it to give us a good picture. We buy a car, we expect it to run. We buy food and we expect it to give us energy and not poison us. If we plant a garden, we want to see what we plant grow and not see just a bunch of weeds. That's what the story of the "vineyard" is all about. God made us, he blessed us in so many ways; he expects results, good results. The other day someone wrote to me and asked, "Since Christ died to free me from sin, and if I believe he did, do I have to do anything else to be saved?" He was asking: "Is God looking for good results from his creation? Does God expect us to do

something with the gifts he has given us?” For our own benefit, we better believe it. The second letter today from St. Paul tells us some of the things God is looking for: “whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious.” “Keep on doing what you have learned and received and heard and seen in me. Then the God of peace will be with you.”

There is a some historical detail in today’s gospel: the servants, whom the owner of the vineyard sent to collect rent, refer to the prophets God sent to his people to call them to faithfulness to his law. But the prophets were rejected and even put to death. The son of the owner of the vineyard, of course, is Jesus who was rejected and put to death. Replacing the tenant farmers by others refers to Christ establishing his Church.

Although God is warning us in these stories of the dire consequences of being spiritually unproductive, there is a lot of love in these stories. In the first reading we heard of the loving attention of Isaiah’s friend to his vineyard, sparing no effort or expense in caring for his vines. But, especially in the gospel, we get a glimpse of God’s love that is beyond common sense. After the owner sent numerous servants to collect the rent and the servants were mistreated and killed, then he decides to send his son. And we ask, “how could he be so dense? Couldn’t he see what would happen?” But God’s love is beyond our understanding. And God keeps on loving us even to giving his own son for us. We celebrate that love now in our Eucharist and we thank God for never giving up on us. Amen.

28th Sunday Ordinary Time – A Cycle Oct. 9, 2005

INTRODUCTION: (*Isaiah 25, 6-10a; Matthew 22, 1-14*) If we were raised in the old school we’re used to associating God’s will with something we don’t like. We just grit our teeth and say: “It’s God’s will. We just have to accept it!” Well God doesn’t always make life easy for us, but today’s first reading gives us a fuller picture of what it is we’re

praying for when we say “thy will be done.” God's will is for our complete and eternal happiness.

In our second reading St. Paul is making reference to a donation he had just received from the Philippians to help support him and his ministry. He is writing to thank them and in his comments he describes some of the ups and downs of being an apostle.

HOMILY: In today's gospel, Jesus compares heaven to the wedding celebration of a prince. It would have been the social event of a lifetime. In that culture, when someone celebrated any wedding, the celebration went on for a few days, not just a few hours like ours do. But for a prince, it would have been lavish beyond belief.

In the story the king sent out servants to inform all of the guests, who had been previously invited, that everything was ready. It's the servants I want to talk about today. I am one of those servants. Today is vocation awareness Sunday. All parishes have been asked to promote vocations and one of the ways I thought I could promote them is to say something personal about my own vocation.

I never had an angel or a vision to tell me to be a priest. It's just an idea that grew in me from the time I made my first Communion at St. Patrick's. But as I grew, I discovered girls and I decided being a priest was something I didn't want to do. But the idea of being a priest wouldn't go away. I reasoned if this really was something God wanted me to do, I better give it a fair try. I knew deep down I would find my greatest happiness only if I did what God wanted me to do. So I went to the seminary intending to stay only one year and to see how it went. I managed to survive for five years that way, always full of doubts about whether that's what God wanted me to do with my life. After five years of that, one evening while I was praying in chapel, all of a sudden, all my questions and doubts disappeared. It was a real gift to me that that happened because in the early years when I was a priest, a lot of priests I

admired and respected were quitting, but that experience in the chapel in the seminary helped me know that God wanted me to be where I was.

In the gospel the servants were treated badly. I've never been treated badly, physically, but I've taken some verbal beatings and when I invite people to respond more to God's invitation, I been ignored many a time. But the good far outweighs the challenges. The happiest part of being a priest is to know that somehow some people's lives are better because I have influenced them for the better. I can truthfully say I have enjoyed almost all of the things I do as a priest (except trying to raise money). The only drawback is that sometimes all of these enjoyable things I do, counseling, praying with people, teaching, visiting the sick, saying Mass, etc. get to be too many enjoyable things and then it can become burdensome. We can have too much of a good thing. But that's part of anybody's life, I'm sure, so I can't complain. As a priest, the opportunities to pray and to grow in knowing and loving God are numerous and most rewarding. One thing that touches me most deeply is confession. It is very humbling and inspiring to me when I hear someone's confession, especially someone who has been away from Church for a while or who is inwardly troubled and I can bring them peace. It is a privilege and a joy like no other.

Everywhere I've been, my ministry has been different, rewarding and challenging. Northside is a lot different than Loveland is for example. But I want to say that my last fourteen years here (and they're not over yet) have been exceptionally rewarding. I love being here, I love the people here. I just wish we had a few more people coming to Mass. In being a priest one gives up family, but I have inherited a larger family and wonderful friends as a priest.

We do not have a lot of young people here unfortunately, so I'm probably not going to get any one to join the seminary or religious life from what I say today. But, a lot of you are grandparents. If your grandchild mentions giving themselves to God in the religious life,

support them. It's a good life, as good as any life can be. I recommend it.

29th Sunday Ordinary Time – A Cycle

October 16, 2005

INTRODUCTION: (*Isaiah 45, 1.4-6; Mt. 22, 15-21*) The Babylonians lived in the land we now know as Iraq, 600 years before Christ. The capital city of Babylon was just less than 100 miles south of modern day Baghdad. 587 years before Christ the Babylonians conquered the Jews and enslaved most of the Jews and took them as captives to Babylon. At that time the Persians lived in modern day Iran. Fifty years after the Babylonians conquered the Jews, the Persians conquered the Babylonians. The Persian king, Cyrus, allowed the Jews to return to their Israel. He even encouraged them to rebuild their temple to Yahweh. The prophet Isaiah, in today's first reading, sees the hand of God at work in all these events. He calls this pagan king, Cyrus, God's anointed. And although Cyrus thought it was by his own strength and shrewdness that he conquered the Babylonians, Isaiah said this was God's doings. Isaiah stresses the absolute supremacy of God, a theme in today's liturgy.

HOMILY: There were some scientists and biologists who thought they had found the secret of life. And they decided to tell God he was no longer needed. They said they could create life also. God said "well, I created life from a hand full of dirt." They said we could too. Then they picked up a hand full of dirt and started to show God what they could do. God said to them, "wait just a minute. Create your own dirt."

In today's gospel, the enemies of Jesus thought they really had Jesus in trouble this time. The gospel tells us he was approached by Pharisees *and* Herodians. These two groups were bitter enemies. Israel was under Roman rule, as you know, and the Herodians were totally loyal to Rome. They would have immediately accused Jesus of promoting civil rebellion and revolution if he had said "don't pay the taxes." The Pharisees, on the other hand, held that God alone was their king and Lord and they viewed the payment of taxes to Rome as caving in to the hated Roman emperor, Tiberius Caesar, a foreigner and a pagan at that! This hot issue was made worse by the fact that Rome's tax burden on the Jewish people was extremely heavy. Jesus asked them to show him a Roman coin; apparently he didn't have one. The fact that they could produce one gave evidence that, like it or not, they participated in Rome's commerce and economy. Jesus' answer to their

question is well known, “Give back to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”

Jesus avoided getting caught in their trap. He reminded us we have obligations to both God and civil authority. We need good leadership in our country and in the countries of the world. With good leadership the citizenship will prosper. Without it the people will suffer. St. Paul even reminds us to pray for our leaders and obey them. (I Tim 2,2 and Rom 13). In this particular confrontation, Jesus did imply that since the people chose to participate in the Roman economy, they had obligations there. But Jesus did not answer how we are to treat some of those thorny issues that we have to deal with in a society that believes in the separation of Church and State.

We have to figure out most of those issues ourselves, taking a cue from other things Jesus taught us, especially from his teaching that obeying God is our greatest responsibility. When we break the laws of our country, we get arrested or fined or have to pay some consequence. When we break God’s laws, however, God doesn’t come knocking on our door ready to fine us or lock us up in jail. If he did, people wouldn’t get by with a lot of the things they do. But God isn’t in the business of being a policeman. Rather he is interested in having us love him and doing right because of love. And love cannot be forced; it must be given freely. God could have made us all robots and we would have done exactly what he wanted us to do, but if we were robots we would not be human nor would we be capable of love. When God gave us a free will, God took a big chance that we might choose **not** to love him. Apparently he thought it was worth taking that chance.

Give back to God what is God’s, Jesus tells us. Because God does not come knocking on our doors when we do not give him what we owe him, it’s easy for us to say I’ll pray later, or I’ll go to church next week or I’ll be good later! Later may not come for any of us. Nothing is more important than our relationship with God. Some day we will leave behind all the other things that we think are so important, and the only thing we will have left is the love for God and for others that we have demonstrated in our daily lives. That love will grow and develop only by prayer and good works.

In our society, which wants immediate results, many important things in life do not give immediate pay offs. When we plant a seed in the ground, it doesn’t produce fruit the next day. If we buy stock in a good company today, it probably won’t go up 50 points tomorrow. A good education takes many years before it pays

dividends. The things we do to serve and obey our God are an investment, an investment that will bless us in this present life, but the full rewards of such a life are off in the future. As St. Paul tells us “eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor has it entered into our hearts what things God has prepared for those who love him.” (I Cor 2,9) What God asks of us is simple: prayer, obedience, love, love for God and for each other. In line with prayer, we cannot neglect the most important prayer we have, the Eucharist. “Do this in memory of me,” he said. That’s why we’re here today, to give to God our ears to listen, our hearts to be united with him, our gratitude, our expressions of faith as we praise him and receive him.

We will get in trouble with the law if we do not give back to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, but we have the most to lose if we do not give back to God the things that are God’s. Our eternal happiness depends on it. Amen.

31st Ordinary Time – A Cycle

October 30, 2005

INTRODUCTION: (*Malachi 1, 14b-2,2b. 8-10; Matthew 23, 1-12*)

Malachi was a prophet who lived about 400 years before Christ. He was definitely a fire and brimstone type prophet. Our reading begins with Malachi condemning the priests of his day for offering sacrifices unworthy of God. The usual sacrifice a person offered was an animal, usually sheep or oxen. People were bringing in animals for sacrifice that were blind, lame and sick – the kind of animals the owner wanted to get rid of anyway. The priest carried out the sacrifice and probably also had to be bribed in order to accept the animal since the law required that only perfect specimens be used in making a sacrifice to God. Malachi told them to offer that sick or blind animal as a gift to the governor and see if he would be pleased. The people were falling into sin, so Malachi condemned the priests for not teaching the people God’s ways. One such thing the priests were telling the people was “everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the Lord, and he delights in them.” It sounds like new age theology doesn’t it? The last verse of the reading seems to be out of context as Malachi turns his focus to the people and chastises them for breaking God's covenant through sins of adultery, dishonesty and injustice. The reading prepares us for the gospel where Jesus condemns the Jewish leaders of his day.

HOMILY: Malachi and Jesus are dealing with the sinfulness of the religious leaders of their day. The priests in Malachi's day were offering unworthy sacrifices to God and neglecting to teach the people how God wanted them to live. In Jesus' day, the priests (also referred to as the Sadducees) received their share of condemnation from Jesus, but it seems the Pharisees and scholars of the law received the majority of Jesus' criticism. The Pharisees were not priests, but lay leaders, trained in leading the people in Scripture study and in liturgy. They were not all bad people. Remember Nichodemus and Joseph of Arimathea were Pharisees. So was Paul who at first persecuted the followers of Christ but later became the great apostle to the nations. Some of their membership, as we hear in today's gospel, were more interested in looking good rather than in being good. They were interested in using their position to bring glory upon themselves rather than to serve God people and to lead them to give glory to God. At any time in history we can find leaders, religious or not, who were good leaders or who abused their position. It happens in religion, any religion, and it happens in all levels of society and business. And the abuse of power manifests itself in many ways. It is especially distressing when it happens among religious leaders. They, above all people, should be models of holy living. When I was growing up, the biggest scandals I would hear about were when priests or nuns thought they were little gods, thinking they should be treated as if they were on a pedestal and the world should bow to their demands. That pedestal has crumbled. The Church's voice of authority is simply ignored by many today. The scandal of priests abusing children and the way it was handled by the hierarchy has given the Church's authority a serious blow in our own day. We must remember that society needs authority, and the church needs authority so it does not degenerate into anarchy. I can understand the feelings of those who have walked away from the Church because of some people's abuse of power, but at the same time those who have walked away are missing a lot of good spiritual blessings because they have walked away. Jesus spoke very harshly of the punishment of those who cause scandal. It would be better for them if a great millstone were tied around their neck and they were thrown into the sea. Yet he also says to the people

in today's gospel about the Pharisees: "do and observe all things whatsoever they tell you, but do not follow their example." It reminds me of a comment St. Theresa made about a spiritual director. She said she would rather have a learned priest as a spiritual director than a holy one. In other words, she figured she would get better guidance from one who knew what they were talking about than one who didn't. Ideally, of course, the best arrangement would be to have one who was both learned and holy. It's a goal I try to achieve in my own priesthood, but I know I do not always achieve it. I keep asking God's forgiveness for my failures. I am grateful to know that God is a merciful God. In turn I ask forgiveness of anyone I may have let down here at St. Boniface.

Many of you are in positions of authority too, maybe in your work, maybe as parents. Did you ever think that in your close relationships you exercise a kind of authority over others too, because in those relationships you are an influence on another person for better or for worse. Let us, in our prayers, remember all people who have positions of leadership in whatever field they serve that they may use their position to serve well. And may you who influence others in whatever way lead those under your care to know the God of love and to follow him in a sincere way. May you, in all your dealings, be both wise and holy. Amen.